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MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE COPPER ESKIMO

INTRODUCTION

In 1914, when the Canadian Arctic Expedition established its headquarters at Bernard Harbour in Dolphin and Union Strait, on the western fringe of Copper Eskimo territory, the natives preserved their old culture, virtually unimpaired, despite contact with several explorers in the middle of the nineteenth century, and with others during the early years of the twentieth. The only visible change caused by these contacts was the introduction of a considerable quantity of iron, which the Eskimo hammered cold, as they hammered their native copper, and had already substituted for copper in knives, adzes, harpoon-heads, and needles. From lack of ammunition the only men who possessed rifles, five in number, had fallen back on the bow and arrow, which was still the universal weapon of the chase. Of the arrows not tipped with bone about two-thirds bore tips of hammered copper and only one-third tips of iron; the ice chisel and other tools retained their copper blades and points; and the soapstone pot for cooking meat held undisputed sway in every household. All clothing was of skin or fur, mainly from the caribou and the seal; and in cut and adornment it followed without change the styles set by earlier generations. The blubber of the seal, burned in a soapstone lamp, provided the only artificial light, and throughout the winter months all the energies of the Eskimo were concentrated on the pursuit of seals at their breathing holes in the sea ice.

Ten years later the situation had undergone a profound change. Native copper had become practically valueless and served for rivets only. Bows and arrows had disappeared, because every native was now armed with a high-powered rifle. Other weapons and tools had steel or iron blades, metal cooking pots had ousted the soapstone-vessels, and primus lamps and kerosene lanterns were spreading from home to home. Fur clothing was tending to follow western Eskimo patterns, and to be overlaid with bead-work, or with imported garments of cotton or wool. Dissatisfied with the old-fashioned snow-hut and skin-covered kayak, one native had even erected a plank cabin heated by an iron stove, and purchased a motor-boat to transport his household goods along the coast during the brief summer months. The tentacles of the fur trade had firmly gripped the region, and the trapping of foxes, animals of no economic importance in earlier times, now rivalled in importance the hunting of seals and caribou.

Fortunately, before this revolution occurred, the Canadian Arctic Expedition had brought out a large collection of Copper Eskimo specimens, nearly all of which are now stored in the National Museum at Ottawa. These specimens, and

321 412 tool, and the drill. In our time nearly all these tools had steel or iron blades, and a fifth had been added, a small saw with a blade of hoop iron. Saws were not numerous, however, and it was still a common sight to see a native scoring deep cuts in bone or antler with his grooving tool and then breaking out sections with his adze. The curved whittling knife gave the final shape, and rubbing, first with stone or sand and then with a strip of hide, the smoothness and polish. Musk-ox horn alone was susceptible of a different treatment; to make from it ladles and scoops, the natives split it longitudinally, steamed it over their cooking pots, then opened it out and bent it to shape by simple pressure and hammering.

237 There was current among the Copper Eskimo one other substance similar to the foregoing, baleen, but it was rather scarce, and in the eastern part of the territory almost unknown. Whether it came from stranded whales, or was brought in from the west, I did not discover. The natives used it, apparently, 232 for fishing lines only, lines mainly for catching tomcod during the winter months 227 when the more usual lines of sinew tended to become brittle with encrusted ice. 283 I never saw them cut or split baleen, but doubtless they used the whittling knife for this purpose.

HIDES AND SINEW

237 [433] It is hard for the civilized inhabitant of a warmer country to realize the immense importance of skins in the domestic economy of the Copper Eskimo. They provide him with clothes and bedding throughout both winter and summer, bags in which to store his clothing, a tent for use nearly half the year when a snow-hut was either uncomfortable or impossible, a cover for his kayak, straps and lashings for his sled, harnesses and traces for the dogs, lines and lashings for harpoons and other weapons, packing lines, dog packs, water buckets, pokes for meat and blubber, and other articles for which Europeans utilize cloth, rope, or metal. It was, consequently, of the utmost importance to the native that he should know how to treat skins to the best advantage. Fortunately, the two animals on which he depended most for his food, the seal and the caribou, were precisely the ones whose hides were the most useful.

281 [225] *Seal Skins.* The Copper Eskimo had two methods of skinning a seal. They generally made a cut around the base of each flipper, another around the neck, and a third down the belly, after which they separated the skin from the blubber with a knife. As it was impossible to remove all the blubber in this way, the skin was then soaked in warm water. Holding one end in her mouth while the [462] [412] other remained in the pot, the woman (for the work almost invariably fell on the housewife) scraped it thoroughly with her curved knife. As soon as the weather was warm enough she set it out to dry, sometimes on top of the house, sometimes on the ground, sometimes pegged over and around a block of snow.

A sealskin thus dried was roughly oval in shape and still retained the hair [415] on the outside. If you folded in the ends, doubled it over and tied a line to [492] each end, you had the common Copper Eskimo fishing bag; if you laced each end across through the holes by which it was pegged out, you had a dog pack, broad and flat in the middle where it rested on the animal's back, and bag-shaped at each end for holding the meat or clothing. The hair was no 281 disadvantage in such skins; indeed, for raincoats and for spring foot gear it 294 was indispensable, but as the skin was more supple without it, it was generally removed by resoaking in warm water and scraping with a knife. To soften the skin still more, and to change the outer surface from a dark colour to white, it was subjected to further scraping, and, after drying, rubbed between the hands and chewed between the teeth, when odd scraps that came away found lodging in the chewer's stomach. From these creamy white skins were made the sealskin